CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. The purpose and statement of the topic:

A Chinese proverb says: “Women are half of the sky”. The truth of this proverb is self-evident. This proverb affirms the role of women worldwide, in administrative organizations, leadership, social works, and cultural spheres. In the common life, women have to play different roles as mothers, sisters, wives, and symbols of beauty. In Buddhism, they are laywomen, almswomen (nuns) and female Bodhisattva; especially in the present research work, it will be demonstrated through the theory of Tathāgatagarbha (Tathāgata-embryo). Women are truly mothers of all human beings, who conceive lives. With their love the entire civilized communities grow up and exist in the world today. At the same time they have other relations also such as sister, sister-in-law, daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law and others. They are worthy of being symbol of garbhadhātu (the womb matrix world).

In Mahāyāna sūtras, there is an important text, namely, the Śrīmālādevi-Simha-Nāda Sūtra, which deals with the doctrine of Tathāgatagarbha as being identical with the Ultimate Reality. The main character in the text is a certain Queen Śrīmālā. Once it so happened that she prays unto Buddha that: “If the Lord Buddha may come for the sake of the world, may he, with compassion, come here on behalf of the teaching for me!”

1 Alex and Hideko Wayman (tr). The Lion’s roar of Queen Śrīmālā, Motilal Banarsidass; Delhi, 1990, p. 60.
Granting her prayers, the Buddha appears himself to the Queen. He is supposed to have said the following to the Queen: "As you have comprehended the true nature of the Tathāgata, you will erect an excellent pure land. Queen, in your former lives I have made you practice toward enlightenment; and in the future lives I shall assist you."\(^2\)

Moved by these words of the Buddha, the Queen accordingly is said to have taken the following ten vows as accorded in Śrīmālā Sūtra

i. Never to violate the religious discipline.

ii. Never to be haughty.

iii. Never to get angry at the other.

iv. Never to be jealous of anyone.

v. Never to cling to things of the world.

vi. Never to abandon the practice of four acceptances, namely, of charity, of kind words, of wholesome deeds, of detachment.

vii. Never to give rise to envious feelings.

viii. Always to work for the freedom of sentient beings from samsāric sufferings.

ix. Always to endeavour to bring those onto the right path of Dharma who violate the code of discipline.

x. Always to adhere to the teachings of true Dharma.

The image of Queen Śrīmālā is shown in the text as preaching the Ekayāna or One Vehicle path of the Mahāyāna. The Mahāyāna is said to be representing the Buddhāyāna. Therefore the Buddhāyāna, Bodhisattvayāna and Ekayāna are said to be identical, and do not represent separate Vehicles. The ultimate goal of the Mahāyāna is said to be the attainment of

\(^2\) Alex and Hideko Wayman (tr) *Op. Cit.* p. 62
enlightenment. This goal is said to be identical with the realization of one’s Buddhahood. Thus enlightenment is seen to be constitutive of Dharmakāya as the Tathāgata.

The text Śrīmālā sūtra says that three types of persons are qualified to enter the path of the Mahāyāna. They are (i) the ones who have become perfect through the cultivation of Dharma-wisdom; (ii) the ones who have gained complete perfection in the cultivation of Dharma-obedience; and (iii) the ones who, although do not understand perfectly the nature of wisdom, have complete faith in the Tathāgata. The text also shares many religious themes of piety with such texts as Saddharmapuṇḍarīkastava sūtra, Avatamsaka sūtra, Vimalakīrti sūtra, and others. The Śrīmālā sūtra played an important part in the development of the roles and piety of laywomen within the Mahāyana Buddhism.

It is well known that it was during the time of Lord Buddha that Lord Buddha had permitted women for joining the Saṅgha. This is the earliest of women’s association in the world in general, especially in a society with multi-caste, multiple religious and diverse sets of traditional customs in India.

In the time of Buddha an idea of the entry of a woman into the Saṅgha itself was a very great challenge to the established norms. Indian society was not at all accustomed to this idea of women in a Saṅgha. Hence, this introducing of the idea was in itself almost a revolutionary step.

Buddhism developed and bloomed splendidly in India. Buddhist thought has well developed in India in the movement of ideology. Women took refuge into Three Gems as a Buddhist laywoman. The image of woman in Buddhism is not inferior. Women in Buddhism have the right to renounce the world, ordain with the full Buddhist discipline of conduct as Buddhist nuns. They were free to choose their lives as either members of the family or
as almswomen. A Bhikkhuṇī practiced the path of Buddha’s teaching resulted in liberation. There are so many Bhikkhuṇīs successful in their religious lives. Therīgāthā describes the story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who was the step mother of the Buddha. After Queen Mahāmāyā’s death, Mahāpajāpatī became the chief queen. She gave birth to a son called Nanda and a daughter called Sundarinanda. She entrusted the care of her children to the nurses, and she herself reared Prince Siddhartha Gautama.

After the death of King Suddhodana she became very dejected and determined to renounce the worldly life. She approached the Buddha, who was then residing at Nirodhārām of Kapilāvatthu, and sought his permission to join the Order of Buddhist recluses. On a previous occasion a similar request of hers was turned down by the Teacher (Buddha). The Buddha said to her that she should not pray for the entrance into Order of nuns. Though rejected by the Buddha, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī did not lose her patience. She prayed for the second and the third time. She placed her prayer before the Buddha who denied again and again. Then Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī went back with a great sorrow and weeping. Immediately the Buddha left Kapilāvatthu and went to Vaishāli. At that time Mahāpajāpatī and her five hundred companions had their hair cut, put on yellow robes, and then went to Vaishāli to gain the permission of the Buddha. They were met by the gentle Ānanda who, shocked to see them in this doleful plight, but deeply impressed by their zeal and determination, undertook to plead their cause for them with the Buddha. He asked the Lord Buddha three times, saying “It were well, Lord, if women were to have permission granted them to do as she desires.” But the Buddha remained adamant. Ānanda solicited on a fresh argument, appealing to Buddha’s sense of justice and truth, he got him to admit that women were
as capable as men of leading a contemplative life and treading on the paths of Arhatship.

The Buddha admitted that women, having taken to the life of pabbajjā in Buddhism, are capable of attaining the higher fruits of religious life as far as Arhatship. When the Buddha said thus, Ānanda again prayed gladly that when Siddhārtha lost his mother Māhādevi, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī took care of Siddhārtha giving her breast milk. He was brought up by her carefully. The Buddha could not neglect this prayer. At last the Buddha most reluctantly gave permission but imposed eight cardinal conditions (Aṭṭhagarudhammā) on women. Women must abide by the chief eight rules for the admission into the Order.

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī after ordination took to meditation exercises under the direct supervision of the Buddha and soon attained perfection. She lived up to the age of one hundred and twenty and was declared by the Buddha to be the oldest and the most experienced of ordained nuns. When she passed away; the Sangha displayed the ritual of burning her dead body. After the ritual of burning, her relic was collected. The Lord Buddha said to the Sangha that: “If we say about a Great man, she is a Great woman. The things which a man can do, she could do.” Therefore, we should bear in mind that a great man does not depend on appearance; he must have good behaviour and good actions in his life. And this is not limited by sex.

Referred to in Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns) the example of Bāhiyā illustrates this. Bāhiyā was a well-known nun who attained Arahantship faster than anyone else. She was equally capable as the monks of her era. She grasped the highest truth very quickly and deeply once she was admitted to the order and after attaining Arahantship. Her mind and emotions had long been trained and prepared, as that of the monks, so that she could
reach the highest attainment very quickly. The verses of Bhikkhuṇī Bhaddā have been handed down to us in the collection of the Therīgāthā, as she summarizes her life:

"I traveled before in a single cloth,
With shaven head, covered in dust,
Thinking of faults in the faultless,
While in the faulty seeing no faults.
When done was the day’s abiding,
I went to Mount Vulture Peak
And saw the stainless Buddha
By the Order of Bhikkhus revered.
Then before Him my hands in anjali
Humbly, I bowed down on my knees
"Come, Bhaddā," He said to me:
And thus was I ordained.
Debt-free, I traveled for fifty years
In Anga, Magadha and Vajji,
In Kasi and Kosala, too,
Living on the alms of the land,
That lay-supporter-wise man indeed-
May many merits accrue to him!
Who gave a robe to Bhaddā for
Free of all ties is she."³

Such noble images of almswomen are shown in Therīgāthā. Women, who are pioneers in the movement, are step by step, liberated from the pressures of old customs of Indian society.

³. Thīg., pp. 107-111.
Nowadays, women play important roles in society. Women are leaders in various countries. They are successful in different fields such as foreign diplomacy, economics, politics, commerce, education, research, sports and music. However, women have to face bigger challenges and opportunities in order to perform the activities which are most suitable for them.

The problems of women in this world are taken into consideration by many organizations in the world, such as UNICEF, HRW, WITCH, WHO and NGOs. Women are frequently subject to sexual abuse, kidnapping, threats of violence, and the like. That makes them settle in fear and horror. By finding a solution to these social problems, women can be protected against them and therefore have a safe and good life.

The present research project attempts to study critically the position and prospect of women in Buddhism as revealed through the image of the laity woman in the Śrīmālā sūtra and presents some selections for society and women in the present time. In this thesis, the researcher endeavors to depict the roles of Buddhist almswomen (nuns) and laywomen (lay devotees). Buddhist women practice the Buddha’s teachings and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. Their goal is to help other human beings. They not only gain liberation for themselves, but can also help others to become liberated by following the thought of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The present study will make an attempt to present vital solutions for the critical situation of woman in society.

Modern woman is very much aware of her rights. The call for equality of their gender is heard all around the world. They ask for escalation of their status. However, women share very different views in East and West.

In the West, women are considered as goddesses of liberty, peace and love. They are beauties, angels, darlings, and sweethearts. On the other hand,
the Chinese think of women as the source of troubles. They are objects of bad omen. In ancient India, the well-known scholar Altekar has stated: "Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifehood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women by implication, these roles are complete in themselves and women need not pursue any specialized discipline of knowledge, art or profession. The good woman is sweet, gentle, loving, caring and even sacrificing. The mainstream concept of the role of a woman seems to be best described in the anonymous Sanskrit couplet: She (in relation to her husband) is like a mother while cooking and serving food, secretary while he is working, servant at his feet and earth like in forbearance. The historical sources often tend to be elitist and present a glorious picture of the Indian women in the past."\(^4\)

In fact, both men and women are human beings, and both have their own specific strengths. Therefore, there is no need to designate women as goddesses, poisonous serpents or a servant. Women are just human beings!

If compared to men, women are usually more attractive in their appearance, and they tend to have gentler and kinder disposition. They can handle details well and are generally more patient and tolerant than men. While men may be strong physically and stronger in stamina, women have many advantages compared to men. For example, women care for the family and make three meals a day, keep the house clean, nurture the children, and perform many other household chores. If the total number of hours a woman works at home is added up, it will surely be more than the time a man is putting into his job. Men can change jobs from time to time, but women focus their hearts and minds on their families and will not waver.

Most of the people believe that women are only good at manipulating others with their beauty, using their tears as a weapon to conquer men and their eyes as tools to bewitch people. Actually, women have much strength, and they need not use their bodies to gain favor from others. Many characteristics of women, such as intelligence, wisdom, diligence, and kindness, are already good enough to overshadow men. Therefore, they do not need to use their physical attributes in exchange for fame and fortune because they are fully capable of competing with men at any stage with their abilities and wisdom.

We live in the age of democracy in which women have as many rights as men; the work of ladies of the present-day generation is no longer confined to kitchen, religion and household chores. Modern women move freely in society and even take part in politics.

In the field of politics, women have already gained many outstanding positions. Tarja Halonen is Finland’s president, Ruth Dreifuss was Switzerland’s president, Margaret Thatcher was Britain’s Prime Minister and Indira Gandhi was India’s Prime Minister. In the business world, Carleton Fiorina is the CEO of Hewlett Packard and Karen Katen is the president of Pfizer. These are the classic examples of the modern spirit exhibited by women.

Women need not be high officials or major entrepreneurs in order to be great. Traditionally, women have always been the guardians of ethics, the advocates of the family system, and practitioners of compassion and peace. There were examples of mothers in history who brought up great generals and renowned scholars. Nowadays, modern women single-handedly care for two generations as they first bring up their children and then go on to cherish their grandchildren.
As the saying goes: “There is always a great woman behind every successful man.” The Queen Mother of England, Queen Elizabeth II is an illustration of one famous mother. She will definitely go down in history as the dedicated queen shoring up her kingdom and country to sustain the devastation of World War II. There are also many famous Queens in Chinese and Indian history who have contributed to the empire of the men in their lives.

Consequently, women can make full use of their abilities. Women can be involved in the community by doing charity work and broadening their horizons. Those who stay home looking after their families and are successful in bringing up outstanding men and women justly deserve to be true to their feminism.

Recognizing the important roles of woman in family, in social and in the religious spheres, the present researcher would like to analyze and attempt a study of the image of a woman laity as reflected in the Śrīmālā Sūtra. It is the topic of study for the proposed research work. Therefore, the topic chosen is “Image of a woman laity in the Śrīmālādevi-Simha-Nada-Sūtra; An analytical study”.

1.2. The scope of the topic:

The image of woman in society encompasses a vast research field. However, in the present research study an attempt is made clear the feminism in Buddhism as revealed through the Śrīmālā Sūtra. This topic includes gender relationship, woman’s voices, woman’s challenges and ethical religion. The present thesis concentrates and focuses on thought and content of the sūtra and how women can take advantage of the analysis of sūtra even in the common life. The aim is to display a typical woman in Buddhism. It is
attempted here in the present thesis to show how to practice practical life of Buddhist laywomen and almswomen in order to earn higher understanding and liberation. The lessons of Lord Buddha will lead the human beings to build a peaceful, happy and proper world. They open a new life for women with the right view of life and find solution for these women facing challenges in modern society. These lessons help us in understanding the idea of “Buddha nature” in each human being without segregating male or female. These lessons point out the role, women have in society and organizations.

There are many problems which can be discussed in this thesis. I have concentrated mainly on the following points:

(a) to introduce, concisely, the feminism in Buddhism through the Śrīmālā-sūtra.

(b) to offer an overview of ‘Śrīmālādevi-simha-nāda sūtra’

(c) to state the central philosophy of the Śrīmālā sūtra

(d) to explain the doctrine of Bodhisattva in Śrīmālā sūra

(e) to present Buddhist views on the position of woman

(f) to show how Queen Śrīmālā is an ideal woman

(g) to offer training in Buddhist education to women and to find a new solution to the social problems of women.

1.3. Method and Structure of the thesis:

1.3.1. Method of the thesis:

Women-studies have had a significant impact over the last three decades. They have contributed to the development of many methodological ideas, for example, standpoints, possibility and reflexivity of women’s lives in modern time. It has initiated various foregrounding critical enquiries into gender, gender-relation and society. Furthermore, women-studies involve a
critique of unexamined assumptions about women and dominant forms of knowing and doing. Women-studies have made a commitment to improve life opportunities for girls and women. Women-studies have states developing equitable professional and personal practices.

By women-studies, are meant women theories, or feminism, as there are different theoretical understandings of the causes of gender oppressions and gender inequalities and therefore different analyses are proposed to different solutions. In this thesis, an attempt is made to make a central feature of research about conceptualization and analysis through the work “Śrīmālā sūtra” in “Mahāyāna sūtras” of Buddhism, as well as through the image of a woman laity, the Queen Śrīmālā to find out the right solution for women in the future and the voice of women in religion.

“Laity” means a woman who believes in a religion and follows the principles of that religion. It can refer to women; it also means a queen; a queen, in general, can be any woman in any social position, particularly in Buddhist religion.

“Śrīmālādevi” is the name of a queen, who spoke Buddha’s teachings with the sound of a lion’s roar. She is the symbol of a laity who had a firm belief in Dharma of Lord Buddha or Mahāyāna thoughts.

The term “sūtra” involves Lord Buddha’s teachings collected by Buddhist patriarchs. This sūtra was uttered by the Queen Śrīmālā with the permission of the Lord Buddha. It is an expression of the equal status accorded to women in Buddhism which is special feature of Buddhism.

The Śrīmālā sūtra is one of the main early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts; it speaks of the doctrine of Tathāgatagarbha and the Single Vehicle, through the words of the Indian Queen Śrīmālā.
Philosophically speaking, the sūtra teaches the reality of an ultimate, immaculate consciousness within each living being, which is the Buddhist “Dharmakāya”, which is yet temporarily sheathed in obscuring defilement. This Dharmakāya, when viewed as intrinsically free from spiritual ignorance, is said to constitute Eternity, Bliss, Purity and Self in their perfect state. Thus, the sūtra has significantly contributed to the Mahāyāna notion of the permanence, steadfastness and eternality of “Tathāgatagarbha” (Buddha-matrix), which is nothing less than the perfect Dharmakāya temporarily concealed by mental contaminants (ultimately unreal).

However, if viewed from a social perspective, the Śrīmālā sūtra provides a typical image of a Buddhist laywoman, who acts as a Bodhisattva. Through this text Buddhist position of a woman is truly illustrated and demonstrated both theoretically and practically.

Research method has been based on library work only. The method followed for this thesis is a studying of principal text and the relevant materials from Mahāyānic literature. As it is known, although the study on Sanskrit text is very necessary, but unfortunately the original Sanskrit texts are lost or not found, therefore I refer to some Chinese versions, commentaries and English translations. One of versions, which was translated into Chinese in 463 C.E. by Guṇabhadra (394-468), the same version, was later translated into English by Alex Wayman and Hideko Wayman under the title ‘The Lion’s Roar of Queen Śrīmālā’. This translation will be relied upon as an important consultation. The same is the main text used in the present thesis for research topic.

Therefore, in the present thesis, the methodology adopted is that of analysis, critical evaluation and interpretation of the image of Queen Śrīmālā.
1.3.2. Structure of the thesis:

The present thesis entitled: “Image of a woman laity in the Śrīmālādevi-simha-nāda sūtra: An analytical study” comprises seven chapters.

First of all, it is necessary to discuss and evaluate the various roles of women in Buddhism. In the first chapter of the present work, the survey of women’s rights in society has been dealt with.

In the second chapter, a summary of the Śrīmālā sūtra is given and point to understand the import of the sūtra in Mahāyāna sūtra. It emphasizes that the Śrīmālā sūtra is an important sūtra belonging to the series of sūtra of Tathāgatagarbha-theory and literature in Mahāyāna thought. This chapter is an attempt to make the survey of the literature and history of the Śrīmālā sūtra, in that its central figure is Queen Śrīmālā. At the same time, I have also tried to explain the title of the Śrīmālā sūtra, comparative study of the Chinese versions, and mentioned significance of equality and aspirations of queen Śrīmālā.

In the third chapter, the Buddhist theories of Tathāgatagarbha, Ekayāna, as well as Dharmakāya, Voidness and the Four Noble Truths have been brought out. These theories are based on the Mahāyāna Buddhism and that is the central philosophy of Śrīmālā sūtra. The philosophy was spoken through the words of the Indian Queen Śrīmālā, who has expounded the basic tenets of Mahāyāna with the permission of the Lord Buddha.

The fourth chapter deals with the concept of Bodhisattva and the Bodhisattva career. It has been devoted to the application of the doctrine of Bodhisattva in Śrīmālā sūtra. Especially, it emphasizes the practices of the Six Pāramitās (Perfections) of Queen Śrīmālā. It evaluates Queen Śrīmālā as
an ideal female Bodhisattva, who on the path to cultivate and practice the Bodhisattva’s career for the welfare and liberation of all sentient beings.

In the fifth chapter, it is considered briefly the status of women in Indian social context during the pre-Buddhist period. This chapter represents the attitude of the Buddha towards women as equal to men in their capacity for personal spiritual development. Especially, by the establishment of Nun’s Order for women, the Buddha has opened to women a new lifestyle as full-time religious practitioners (Bhikkhunī) that make them free from women’s tradition of family life and social roles and obligations. It also refers to the life of laywomen & nuns and their contribution to the benefit of human beings.

The sixth chapter is one of the focal points of topic of the thesis. In this chapter, an attempt is made to investigate image of an ideal woman laity Queen Śrīmālā as known from the Śrīmālā sūtra with the view to bring out the various roles of women in family and society, the social relationships and the significance of women’s role in the religion. The significance and the relevance of the Ten Great Vows of Queen Śrīmālā can be brought out with a reference to the principles of actions for society. These Ten Great Vows are the ways of action to change and solve the difficulties of crisis and the problems of suffering of human beings, the social stability and the welfare of the society.

In the conclusion of this thesis, a summary of the preceding chapters of the thesis is presented. It brings out the purpose of women’s education through image of Queen Śrīmālā. This chapter represents in brief the significance of women’s role in the field of religion. For understanding Buddhist philosophy, Śrīmālā sūtra is the basic and important document of Buddhism not only in India but in China, Japan and Tibet. At the same time,
to a certain extent, present thesis may give new directions for further studyies as well as application of the image of an ideal woman for safe, welfare and happiness of family and society in present life.

1.4. Relevance of present study:

An analytical study about the image of laywoman in the Śrīmālā sūtra provides us with an insight into the problems confronting women in Buddhism and, on the other hand, with the feminist studies. The present thesis focuses on the image of woman in Buddhist literature and has considered the feminist social concepts, as well. The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the role of women in Buddhism. The Dharma, the Lord Buddha has spoken about, does not belong to only male or only female. It belongs to everybody who wants to obtain the liberation of mind and body or enlightenment as the Lord Buddha spoke of it. Through this image of laywoman in this thesis, the present researcher modestly desires to present new solutions to social problems and an aid in the education of laywomen, with the hope that the same will be effective for all women.

The image of woman laity in the Śrīmālā sūtra is very positive in the theory of female limitation, and becomes the preeminent scripture for pleading the case of the ladies. It confirms the role of women in attaining the fruit of liberation or attainment. This is seen in the queen’s constant use of the term “good daughter of the family” along with “good son of the family” as a Bodhisattva on every spiritual level.

The godly and efficient laywoman is so envisaged as to exemplify in the figure of Queen Śrīmālā, as described in the Śrīmālā sūtra.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the image of the laywoman in the Śrīmālā sūtra and also to analyze the woman’s “voice” in modern life.
The aim is to raise the experience and perspective of women’s organizations in Buddhism by helping women in society.

In the present work, an attempt is made to investigate the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines according to Śrīmālā sūtra. It is a very important document to understand Buddhism.

Further it can be understood how powerful and strong is the ideology of this sūtra; it is used to reconstruct many organizations in Buddhism. The study of the religious life of women through image of Queen Śrīmālā can still be the topic for further research studies.

The present thesis work provides an opportunity to look at from Buddhist perspective on women’s spiritual well-being.